

DISCUSSION OF SIGNIFICANT NATURAL HERITAGE AREAS

Cleveland County is moderate in terms of its biodiversity, with low to moderate numbers of rare species and natural community types as compared with other counties in the state. As measured on this scale, counties with greater biodiversity tend to yield higher numbers of Significant Natural Heritage Areas (SNHAs). Cleveland County contains 18 Significant Natural Heritage Areas (SNHAs). Neighboring Burke County, containing most of the South Mountains as well as section of the Piedmont and Blue Ridge, has a total of 36 SNHAs. Rutherford County contains only 13 SNHAs, but it has yet to receive a systematic inventory. A county inventory of Gaston County produced 15 sites considered by the N.C. Natural Heritage Program to merit status as SNHAs. An inventory of Catawba County resulted in 12 SNHAs. Lincoln County has no SNHAs prior to completion of an inventory.

Although the flora and fauna of Cleveland County are decidedly of the Piedmont, they contain some elements of the Blue Ridge and southeastern Coastal Plain of the United States. This is illustrated by the presence of typically montane species and communities in the South Mountains and by the presence of the pygmy rattlesnake (*Sistrurus miliarius*) and the oldfield mouse (*Peromyscus polionotus*), which range well into the Coastal Plain. Such attributes enhance the overall biodiversity of the county. However, some of the rare plant and animal records for the county can not be assigned to the SNHAs in this report. Examples include rare animal species populations that are mobile, cryptic, or that live in highly manipulated habitats. Other rare species are documented from vague, historic data and are believed to be extant, but remain to be rediscovered. Thus, a variety of factors can influence the number and distribution of SNHAs in a county. Minimum criteria must be met to merit designation as a SNHA. Real constraints on time and funding are a factor. Access to potentially significant areas is subject to landowner permission to survey.

In this report, SNHAs are loosely referred to as "sites". The sites in this report fall into three categories, based on criteria developed by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program: standard sites, macrosites, and megasites. **Standard sites** are those containing from one to thousands of acres, with reasonably good integrity throughout. In certain cases, standard sites fall into distinct groups with strong geographical connections and ecological relationships. Such clusters of standard sites are arranged within **macrosites**. Undeveloped lands between standard sites in a macrosite are typically of lower quality, but contain ecologically important buffers, wildlife corridors, or landscape connections. A **megasite** can be delineated where a macrosite lies within an even larger area that forms a geographically and ecologically distinct unit. An example is the containment of the large South Mountains Macrosite within the even larger landscape of the Foothills Megasite. Several standard sites, such as Rollins/South Mountains Natural Area, are constituents of South Mountains Macrosite. Other standard sites, such as High Rock/Gilead Ridge, lie outside of the South Mountains proper but are contained in Foothills Megasite.

The significant sites of Cleveland County are arranged geographically and by significance in Table 4. South Mountains Sites refers to sites located within the South Mountains region of northwestern Cleveland County. First Broad River Drainage Sites refers to sites associated with the First Broad River or its tributaries that fall outside the South Mountains. Broad River/Sandy Run Sites refers to sites related to those stream drainages.

Sites that occur within a larger site are indented in the table. A detailed description of each of the significant sites shown in Table 4 is contained in the Site Descriptions section of this report. A map